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ABSTRACT

A family-oriented sex education course was developed for parents to take together with their children. The program, which is designed for young people between the ages of 9 and 17, is offered in separate sections for the following groups: mothers and their 9- to 12-year-old daughters, mothers and their 13- to 17-year-old daughters, fathers and their 9- to 12-year-old sons, and fathers and their 13- to 17-year-old sons. Five 2 hour sessions were provided for the younger group and six 2-hour sessions were provided for the older group. Through minilectures, films, discussions, activities, and games, the following topics were addressed: reproduction anatomy and physiology, body changes during puberty and adolescence, health and hygiene, pregnancy and childbirth, values and feelings, dating, and decision-making and communication skills. The program has been implemented successfully in various communities in the St. Louis and northwest Missouri area and has been featured in a documentary made for educational television and on a national prime-time news show. (MN)

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN FACILITATING THE TEACHING ROLE OF PARENTS IN THE SEX EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN FACILITATING THE TEACHING ROLE OF PARENTS IN THE SEX EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN

Dr. John Henschke

A recent report by the Danforth Foundation indicated that each year in the St. Louis area 11,405 teen-age girls - one in every eleven - become pregnant by a male partner. To bring the child to eighteen years of age, USA Today states the dollar cost nationally is $142,700. It costs Missouri taxpayers $137,000 exclusive of the additional social, emotional and spiritual costs. Other communities in the nation don't have exactly the same ratio or costs, but their teen-age pregnancies, if calculated, would also be known as too costly.

Aside from this crisis situation there are the thousands of pre-teens as well as teens who need to learn about human sexuality in a healthy way - other than on the playground or from their peers. For a number of generations many fathers haven't been told anything about sexuality by their fathers. So they figure they probably shouldn't tell their sons about it either. Some girls may have confusing misinformation such as the kind which would make them ask, "Can I get pregnant? I'm adopted. My mother couldn't get pregnant, so, I must not be able to, either." Being uncomfortable with their sexuality, parents find ways to get around addressing the matter directly and kids don't ask. Many are too scared to ask.

Many programs developed and designed to meet these needs focus only on factual information while others emphasize not having parents and children together in the same program. Still others are conducted as part of the school curriculum. These have met with some success. However, many communities seeking to implement it into the school have found themselves embroiled

in controversy. This has resulted in a lot of heat being generated, little light and sometimes school officials being fired with accompanying hard feelings within the community.

Recent research indicates that children whose parents have taken an active role in providing their sex education demonstrate more respectful and responsible sexual attitudes and behaviors. One program on parent/child sex education has been implemented which is family oriented and voluntary which parent and children can take together. The two major objectives are to create a situation in which the basic questions about physiology, sex and love are answered, and it also opens up the lines of communication between parents and children. It is based on the belief that parents want to take the lead and be involved in the sex education training of their children. By attending the program parents have the opportunity and support to discuss with their children not only the facts but also the feelings, attitudes and values related to their human sexuality. By taking part in this program they can strengthen their relationship and promote open communication with their child(ren).

This program is designed for young people nine to seventeen years old and their parents. There are four sections: mother/daughter 9-12 years old; father/son 9-12 years old; mother/daughter 13-17; father/son 13-17.

Generally, mothers attend with their daughters and fathers with sons. However, if a person is a single parent or if a parent is working or otherwise unable to attend, a mother may attend with her son, or a "parent-substitute" (grandparent, aunt/uncle, friend) may attend with the child.

The Curriculum

The program consists of five 2-hour sessions for the younger group and six 2-hour sessions for the older group. Through mini-lectures, films,

discussions, fun activities and games, the following topics are presented (in appropriate depth and detail for each age level):

- Reproduction anatomy and physiology;
- Body changes and differences during puberty and adolescence;
- Health and hygiene;
- Reproduction, pregnancy and childbirth;
- Values, attitudes and feelings;
- Dating, decision-making and communication skills

Some of the activities include:

- Anatomy and physiology puzzles to reinforce knowledge and identification of unique male and female body parts;
- What were you taught? What do you want your child to know? Engages parents in looking at their background in sex education and what they want for their children;
- Question box which encourages and gives opportunity to participants for writing and getting answers to questions they may have been reluctant to ask verbally in the group;
- The human sexuality game focuses on parents and children giving answers to questions dealt with during the sessions;
- Films such as "A Family Talks About Sex;" "Human Growth III;" and,
- Distribution of print materials like The Miracle of You, Very Personally Yours. Your New Self-Discovery, A Boy Today...A Man Tomorrow, and Decisions About Sex.

Community Implementation

This program has been conducted successfully in various Northwest Missouri and St. Louis communities - with voluntary participation by parents and their children, sponsorship and endorsements within the community, news releases in the paper, assistance from schools in distributing the announcements, repeat offering of the program with increasing enrollment, and very positive evaluations throughout - all without controversy.

Any individuals, groups or communities desiring to have this program would need to strongly consider including the following elements:

- Find an organization in the community
  - willing to sponsor it,
  - not afraid of being identified with this voluntary program which supports family values and respects various religious values,
  - who knows it is willing to spend the time to do what is necessary to see it happen,
- Obtain endorsements from as many local civic groups as possible,

- Gaining cooperation of the school(s) for conducting an initial need assessment in the community, and,

- To patiently and openly deal with any hesitancy and answer any questions that may be raised about the program.

The Public Broadcasting System Television Documentary

In early 1983, John Merrow, who had for ten previous years produced "Options in Education" for National public radio, was producing "Your Children, Our Children," the first television series to focus national attention on America's 67 million children. The seven, one-half hour documentaries, were aired beginning April, 1984 on PBS-TV, explore issues/subjects central to our young: infant health, sex and sexuality, neglect and abuse, part-time work/part-time school, being normal, child care, and where do we go from here?

The documentary on Sex and Sexuality focuses on this parent/child sex education program conducted in Maryville, Missouri. Merrow did not want to center on the problem of teen-age pregnancy even though a funding agency promised to finance it if he did. He wanted to highlight a program which emphasized a community dealing constructively with the issue of human sexuality before the problems arise. They looked nationwide and chose the one in Maryville.

In April and May, 1983, John Merrow and a PBS-TV crew spent two weeks in Maryville developing their story by filming:

- Two sessions of the parent/child program where eighty people were enrolled,
- Three families enrolled in the program asking them why and the considered value of their involvement,
- The junior/senior high school prom,
- A worship service in a local church,
- Some activities at the school, and,
- Various other activities in the community.

Local outreach activities scheduled by the PBS-TV stations during and after carrying the program include:

- Volunteers taking phone calls from concerned residents, directing them to local agencies concerned about the topic,
- Follow-up radio and television programming,
- The videotapes available for free rental to non-profit organizations and schools,
- Viewer guides provided with the videotapes,
- Discussion guides for teachers provided with the videotapes; and
- The program(s) available also in Spanish.

These documentaries are being aired again during the autumn of 1984 in some parts of the nation.

On September 20, 1984 ABC-TV's "20/20" program themed "Sex Education Class in America." They have chosen to film this parent/child sex education program in Maryville, Missouri as one way a community is seeking to stem the tide of the American teen-age pregnancy problem. Producer Betsy Asha said, "we picked this program because it is a real successful program."

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